

## **My Grandfather's Kitchen**

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Wham! I am suddenly wide awake. Me, my blankets and my down-filled mattress hit the floor. Freezing cold. "...What the hell are you going to do—sleep all day!?" My grandfather, all six-feet-four of him towers over me in the cold morning air. It is six a.m., a New England December in the late 40's in an old, wood frame house where my grandparents rent the second floor. I am nine, sleeping in a small unheated bedroom in an old white-frame house with my grandparents. Shivering in my jockey shorts I snatch back a blanket and curl up under it. From Grandpa's long lean frame comes a throaty, baritone laugh. "Get in the kitchen and eat some breakfast -- get some meat on those bones; you look like a Polish refugee." He is a benign, no-nonsense man, this son of German immigrants, with a gruff, witty humor learned as a young farm boy. He leaves for the kitchen.

Seconds pass, the kitchen door shuts. Silence. Still huddling, I work up courage for the cold dash to the kitchen. In the morning light high up on the wall hangs a large, wood-framed print of a 19th-century ship at nighttime anchor. She's a wooden, two-masted cargo schooner, sails furled, hawser lines looping down to a pier in the foreground, the bowsprit aimed straight out at me. Up on the gunwales I make out the glow of red and green port and starboard lanterns. Was she just in from China? India? The South Seas? Does her hold smell of cinnamon, coconut, maybe pineapples? An avid reader, I picture N.C. Wyeth's exotic pirate drawings from *Treasure Island*.

The kitchen door opens. "Are you dead in there?" Slam. I leap up and struggle into my cold pants and t-shirt. Barefoot, I pad through the darkened dining room past the big oak table with the pewter lamp with a green marble shade, past the pendulum clock tick-tocking on the sideboard.

Wham again! Light, warmth, the smell of bacon, potatoes and chicory. Heat from the open gas oven floods the room, morning sunlight pours from the windows. The big round table is covered with a blue-flowered oilcloth faded from years of scrubbing. In the center sit two crystal water glasses holding cut celery and carrot sticks. I sit down and grab a carrot stick and chew loudly, inhaling the warm smells. There is a reason for heating only the kitchen

on chilly mornings. Grandpa is a shrewd conserver. No need to stoke up the furnace this early – he'll do it when he leaves for work.

"Hello, Grandma." Rotund, six feet tall in her late seventies, she bustles around the stovetop with the skill of a short-order cook, feet deft and sure, an agile woman still. And as tough as Grandpa. They met in town working at Milton Bradley Toy Company and married in 1909. I fill Grandma (Kate) in about my Mom, who is one of her few confidants.

Grandma rarely lets her guard down, sure that fate is waiting in the wings, planning to deliver another sucker punch. Life for Kate, until she married, dealt her a series of unfair blows, not uncommon for a woman growing up in the Victorian era. Her father deserted the family when she was 14. Later she was deserted by her carefree sister, leaving Kate alone to support a disabled mother. In the late 1800's she labored for 20 years in a steam laundry. Concrete floors, moisture-laden air, on her feet ten hours a day, five and a half days a week, her bitter past reflected in her attitude towards life. "Good Morning," she says, "... did you wash your face?" "Yes," I lie. "Now don't lie to me – I can always tell!" "I know," I lie again. Grandma can't see an oak tree at ten feet.

Grandpa's father immigrated to America from Germany in 1861, where, shortly after arriving, he was shanghaied into the Union Army in New York by a group of German con artists. After the war he bought a farm up in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, where Grandpa was born and raised. (In his youth, on a lark, Grandpa taught himself to walk a tightrope.) The farm eventually failed and he left school after the eighth grade to help support the family. However, he reads incessantly, has read all of Mark Twain, and plays Classical music for me on an old Victrola, where I hear arias by Caruso and others, including Rudyard Kipling's Barrack Room songs, like "The Road to Mandalay" and "Danny Deaver." We often see movies together: the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Chaplin, Bogart, Laurel & Hardy and many more 40's and 50's flicks. I love my Grandfather.

In 1910 he became a fireman. He tells stories of horse-drawn fire wagons, about winter nights when icy cobblestoned streets would force the men to jump down and join the horses to help pull the wagons up a hill. Then fire engines replaced the horses (called engines, never "trucks!"). He spoke about how he caught one person – and later on a couple of kids – jumping from the second stories of blazing houses into his strong arms. His firehouse, the Winchester Square Engine Company in Springfield, Massachusetts, drove the first Hook and Ladder engine in America. Because of the new, extra-long ladders, the last quarter-length of these engines was mechanically semi-detached to the front section and had its own wheels, steering mechanism and driver. This arrangement enabled that driver - called a tillerman - to independently turn and maneuver the engine around narrow, city street corners. There were three daily work shifts, making Grandpa and two others the first Tillermen in the country.

He bangs a white porcelain cup down in front of me. "Here. Grow some hair on that chest." The hot, faintly bitter chicory-laced coffee bites my tongue. My grandmother places three filled plates on the table. Fried potatoes mixed with bacon pieces and onions and a fried egg. She is first generation Irish. Her food is basic - no frills, always delicious. Despite her hard-knock life she's always gentle with us kids. Her large hands are worn smooth from decades of use. They haven't hardened in the least, but so worn that the fingerprints are almost invisible. When I was smaller, she would rub a wet hand over my face to clean it, the silky smoothness delightful.

We eat. Grandpa hasn't put on his blue fireman's shirt yet; he sits wearing his tank-top. Grandma quietly nibbles at her food while I sneak a look at him, fascinated by the movement of the cords in the longest neck in the world as he chews; they move up and down, like steel cables, in a steady rhythm, appearing then disappearing over and over. He rarely speaks when eating, his eyes gazing somewhere in the distance. He has false teeth. Maybe he's concentrating on holding them in his mouth? I often spend Friday night and Saturday mornings here. When breakfast is over they let me go out for weekend adventures downtown. I think I'm their favorite grandchild.

Breakfast over, Grandpa rises and steps over to the old porcelain sink. Time for my favorite show. He bends his lanky frame over the sink and pops out his false teeth. He brushes, rinses, and pops them back in. He takes his father's German pewter soap cup above the sink (their identical initials engraved on it), runs water in it then vigorously swirls an ivory-handled shaving brush in the cup to raise a lather. He takes his ivory-handled straight razor made in the nineteenth century in Solingen, Germany, probably by his father who worked there over open-hearth forges making world famous cutlery. He grabs hold of a long brown razor strop hanging on a nail. His long muscular arms stroke the razor back and forth along the dark leather belt -- zoop zoop zoop. Then he tests the edge with his thumb. Satisfied, he soaps up his neck and face. Then, with sure, rasping strokes the razor does its job. He finishes, rinses everything off and dries his face, brushes down his short gray hair, dons his blue shirt from a wooden rack where it has been warming by the stove, and adds a black tie. Time for work.

"Hey, Grandpa, can I bring your lunch basket to the firehouse today?" I know the answer will be yes, but he likes to play. "With those skinny arms and that basket the dogs on the street will chew up you with my lunch." I grin. "Naw - I'll chew the dogs up first!" He puts on his blue coat, grinning back at me, his long false teeth looking like the Joker's smile in Batman comics. "See you exactly at twelve, then. Don't be late!" He retrieves his Captain's hat from a hook in the pantry. "So long, Kate - don't set the house on fire." He slams the door on his way out to the stairwell and is gone.

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